HOW TO RULE THE WORLD



AN EDUCATION IN POWER AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY

THEO BAKER

How to Rule the World

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

How to Rule the World

An Education in Power at Stanford University

THEO BAKER



ALLEN LANE
an imprint of
PENGUIN BOOKS

Copyrighted Material

ALLEN LANE

UK | USA | Canada | Ireland | Australia
India | New Zealand | South Africa

Allen Lane is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies
whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com

Penguin Random House UK
One Embassy Gardens, 8 Viaduct Gardens, London SW11 7BW

penguin.co.uk

Penguin
Random House
UK

First published in the USA by Penguin Press, an imprint of Penguin Random House LLC 2026
First published in Great Britain by Allen Lane 2026
001

Copyright © Theodore Baker, 2026

The moral right of the author has been asserted

Penguin Random House values and supports copyright.
Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes freedom
of expression and supports a vibrant culture. Thank you for purchasing
an authorized edition of this book and for respecting intellectual property
laws by not reproducing, scanning or distributing any part of it by any
means without permission. You are supporting authors and enabling
Penguin Random House to continue to publish books for everyone.
No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner for the
purpose of training artificial intelligence technologies or systems. In accordance
with Article 4(3) of the DSM Directive 2019/790, Penguin Random House
expressly reserves this work from the text and data mining exception.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

The authorized representative in the EEA is Penguin Random House Ireland,
Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978–0–241–73391–2

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future
for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from
Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.

MIX
Paper | Supporting responsible forestry
FSC® C018179
www.fsc.org

Copyrighted Material

For my parents, Peter and Susan,

and my late grandfathers, Ted and Steve

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

It is a well-known fact that those people who must *want* to rule people are, ipso facto, those least suited to do it.

—DOUGLAS ADAMS, *THE RESTAURANT AT THE END OF THE UNIVERSE*

I am not afraid of storms, for I am learning how to sail my ship.

—LOUISA MAY ALCOTT, *LITTLE WOMEN*

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

CONTENTS

YOUR STANFORD POCKET DICTIONARY xi

Prologue: Fear the Tree 1

1 **Drafted to the War on Fun** 15

2 **The Impostor** 35

3 **Coupa Circuit** 53

4 **Binary Bomb** 73

5 **A Fucking Menace** 99

6 **Rule** 119

7 **Duck Syndrome** 141

8 **Harriet the Spy** 155

9 **[[NOT FOR DISTRIBUTION]]** 173

10 **The Good Paper** 197

11 **TreeHacks** 215

Copyrighted Material

12 **Solve for People** 229

13 **Free to Speak** 243

14 **No Room for Error** 257

15 **Money Is a Rush** 265

16 ***Finis Origine Pendet*** 279

Coda 295

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS 303

NOTES 309

Copyrighted Material

YOUR STANFORD POCKET DICTIONARY

1. **10x engineer:** (n.) Better than you. A 10xer is a coder worth 10 "average" coders—although nowadays some influential Silicon Valley thinkers have argued (and paid) for the concept of 1000x engineers.
2. **Anti-signal:** (adj.) The tech-bro way of saying something looks bad.
3. **B2B:**
   (adj.) business-to-business, or a company that sells directly to other companies, not consumers. Often coupled with a software-as-a-service strategy, aka "B2B SaaS," and generally lucrative but dull.
   (n.) Bay to Breakers is a race across San Francisco that takes place each spring. Stanford students get up and get drunk at 5:00 a.m. while wearing absurd outfits, then take the train into the city together and participate in the race.
4. **Builders:** (n.) What you want to be. Generally refers to those at the forefront of innovation, creating for the sake of it. Also a title assumed by many pretenders.
5. **Coupa Circuit:** (n.) The intermeshed network of students, investors, scouts, and others who hang around all day at Coupa Café.
6. **CS107:** (n.) The computer science weeder course, known for its grueling final assignments, "Binary Bomb" and "Heap Allocator."
7. **Directionally correct:** (adj.) Pesky facts aside, you nailed it!
8. **Duck Syndrome:** (n.) When you look fine on the surface, but your legs are paddling like crazy just to keep afloat.
9. **Effective altruism:** (n.) EA was the most popular Silicon Valley philosophy when I arrived—basically just rebranded utilitarianism. After Sam Bankman-Fried's fall from grace, EA floundered.
10. **Eurotrash:** (n.) Stanford's traditional first party of the year. It was canceled.
11. **Fear the Tree:** (n.) A rallying cry Stanford students shout at sports events.

Copyrighted Material

12. **Fizz:** (n.) An anonymous social media app started by Stanford students and only accessible by members of the community. Full of vitriol, rampant falsehood, and abuse; raised $41.5 million despite no apparent revenue.
13. **Friends and Family:** (n.) A Builders' society of sorts, where Stanford insiders congregate. Funded by VCs.
14. **Full Moon on the Quad:** (n.) A Stanford tradition where students go to Main Quad and all kiss each other under the full moon. Except now it's the bureaucratic version.
15. **Gift authorship:** (n.) The shady, albeit normalized, practice of researchers adding their names to papers they had little to do with. Generally done by those with seniority.
16. **Hangers-On:** (n.) Those bloodthirsty adults who are always on campus, always looking for teenagers they can exploit.
17. **High-agency:** (adj.) Greater than the rest, these Übermenschen have superseded the need for normal "rules" and inhibitions.
18. **Hoover Institution:** (n.) The influential conservative think tank housed at Stanford; home to iconic Hoover Tower, the tallest building on campus; led by former secretary of state Condoleezza Rice.
19. **Lean LaunchPad:** (n.) The most famous, most established startup class, teaching agile methodology.
20. **Marriage Pact:** (n.) The Stanford student matchmaking service that algorithmically pairs people once a year; has raised millions with no demonstrated ability to generate revenue.
21. **Nerd Nation:** (n.) Stanford's own self-description. They put it on our T-shirts.
22. **Ngmi:** (adj.) Not gonna make it, applied to those who don't have the hustle.
23. **No Filter:** (n.) An insider club bringing CEOs to have confidential conversations with Stanford students.
24. **Party Review Committee:** (n.) The PRC is the manifestation of Stanford's borderline authoritarian approach to student life.
25. **Pre-idea funding:** (n.) Who needs an idea to start a company these days? That's so passé! All you need is smart people and cash.
26. **Pre-revenue:** (adj.) You're making no money. But it's a good thing! Better to have no revenue but the *potential* for radical growth than a meager yet consistent profit.
27. **Pset:** (n.) Problem set. The basic unit of measurement for any STEM class at Stanford, usually assigned once a week, some requiring dozens of hours each.
28. **PubPeer:** (n.) The pseudonymous website where scientists scrutinize published research.

Copyrighted Material

29. **Reality-distortion field:** (n.) The ability to redefine the world as you please through sheer will and insistence, facts be damned.
30. **Rollout:** (v.) To be rolled out is to be torn from your bed at an early hour as initiation to a competitive club.
31. **Rule:** (n.) How all insiders refer to How to Rule the World, the most secretive—and exclusive—hub for the Stanford inside Stanford.
32. **S.H.I.T.:** (n.) The Stanford Highly Incompetent Team was a group of car aficionados who built a race team in an underground garage with no budget.
33. **SLE:** (n.) The Structured Liberal Education, a first-year program whose students live together and study Great Books. Nerdy.
34. **Swe:** (adj.) Someone who has received a Software Engineering internship for the summer might say, "I'm swe."
35. **Technical:** (adj.) A judgment on your worth as a person.
36. **The Big Three:** (n.) *Science*, *Nature*, and *Cell*, the three journals that can make or break your career.
37. **The Plucked:** (n.) Stanford students who are found early and drafted to a parallel track with so much excess and access that is kept inaccessible to the hoi polloi.
38. **TreeHacks:** (n.) A hackathon, but also a gathering point for ambitious future entrepreneurs. Brilliant and saturated with money.
39. **The Turkey Drop:** (n.) When all those freshman long-distance relationships break up, usually around Thanksgiving.
40. **Unicorn:** (n.) A company that has achieved a valuation greater than $1 billion. Status symbol.
41. **Wantapreneur:** (adj.) Derogatory term describing those who want to be CEOs not because they want to innovate, but because they desire all the associated perks and status.
42. **War on Fun:** (n.) Stanford's bureaucratic crackdown on all facets of student experience. Not limited to parties.

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

How to Rule the World

Copyrighted Material

Copyrighted Material

PROLOGUE

FEAR THE TREE

Everybody wants to rule the world.

—TEARS FOR FEARS

It was a secret. That's about the only thing I knew.

I was two months into freshman year at Stanford University, a coder quickly turning into an investigative journalist, and I'd arrived three minutes early to my tryout for the secret class, unsure what to expect.

The professor was nowhere to be found. "I'm here," I texted him, scanning faces around me to see if I'd missed someone. We were supposed to meet at Tresidder Memorial Union, the nondescript food court for visitors—the most public building at Stanford.

I had no idea who I was looking for. I mean, I knew his name, Justin, and that he ran a successful startup in Silicon Valley. I knew that he valued privacy above all else. And I knew that he was teaching a highly exclusive seminar for the winter quarter that required a cloak-and-dagger admissions process. But that was it. There was nothing about this class in the course catalog, nothing about it on the internet, and nothing that anyone would tell me—except that I definitely wanted to be in it.

Copyrighted Material

My phone rang.

"Walk to your right, past the Panda Express, toward the tables," said the voice. "I'm in the corner."

Once I laid eyes on him, Justin stood out. He was tall and lanky, with shoulder-length hair and a full beard. His posture radiated confidence. He looked like a techno-Jesus. If Jesus were grilling teenagers in a food court, I guess.

Another kid was still sitting with Justin, and I recognized him from a recent dinner hosted by a venture capital investor, the kind of dinner that Stanford students—or at least a certain kind of Stanford student—get invited to all the time. The kid looked a little dejected, standing up and making way for me at the table without so much as a greeting. Justin motioned to the vacated chair and I sat.

"So, you know what the class is, right?" Justin asked.

"Um, sort of?" I answered hesitantly.

Justin glanced down at his leather-bound notebook, checking to see who'd referred me. To be worthy of an interview, you had to be tapped on the shoulder by someone already in the class; by virtue of my coding ability, two of Justin's chosen few had recommended me. Satisfied, Justin looked back up.

He summarized his aim succinctly. "There doesn't exist a substantial network of the most brilliant people at Stanford," Justin said. "By helping them find each other, the entire cohort is lifted up." His job was to figure out whether I belonged.

"Questions will be divided into two parts, your past and your future," he said. "I can tell everything I need to know about you in twenty minutes."

And, for what turned into half an hour, Justin quizzed me.

"What has been your highest emotional high?"

"What has been your lowest emotional low?"

"And what is the thread that ties them together?"

Justin sat ramrod straight, eyes burrowing into me. He didn't seem to blink. He told me that he was assessing me for my "scope of ambition, intelligence, and emotional quotient."

Copyrighted Material

And, at the end, he let me ask some questions. There was only one thing I really wanted to know.

"What is the class actually about?" I asked. Left unsaid: What was the point of all of this? Why, exactly, had I just endured this interrogation?

"When I was at Stanford," Justin explained, "I learned that the only people who understood the world were the literal children of billionaires." Now he'd figured out those secrets for himself. "There are a number of simple but non-obvious frameworks that govern how the world works," he said. "By learning them, a huge amount of latent talent and potential in the most promising people can be unlocked."

And, if I got in, he would teach me.

California was once the site of the great gold rush that transformed America. "It was that population," wrote Mark Twain, "that gave to California a name for getting up astounding enterprises and rushing them through with a magnificent dash and daring and a recklessness of cost or consequences, which she bears unto this day."

He termed his own era of American excess the Gilded Age.

Yet the fortune generated by Silicon Valley in the past few decades has exceeded the value of all gold discovered during the first California boom two hundred times over, even adjusted for inflation, and concentrated the lucre in still fewer hands. Even the richest men of Twain's time would find Elon Musk's trillion-dollar pay package remarkable.

Once a bucolic region dominated by farmland and horse trails, this little stretch of Northern California now sets the agenda for the planet. That sounds like an exaggeration, but it's not. Every aspect of modern life is dependent on technology, and technology flows through here. The value of public companies based in the area is $14.3 trillion—greater than the GDPs of the United Kingdom, Germany, and India combined, with enough left over to cover the assets of every major bank in Africa. Private companies add at least another trillion.

Copyrighted Material

Silicon Valley gave birth to the chips and computers and internet that we all rely on in the twenty-first century. Technology became king. As Bob Martin, an influential software pioneer, put it a decade ago, "*We* rule the world. The world doesn't know this yet." Martin explained that "other people believe that they rule the world," yet "we write the rules that go into the machines that execute everything that happens on this planet nowadays. No law can be enacted without software. No law can be enforced without software. No government can act without software. We rule the world."

Ten years later, the world may have taken notice. After all, the top tech CEOs in the world were the ones standing directly behind President Donald Trump at his inauguration while political leaders were shunted to the overflow room.

Today's tech tycoons are not dissimilar to the robber barons of Twain's time. Wealth inequality is by some metrics greater in Silicon Valley than in any other region in the world; just eight households in Santa Clara and San Mateo Counties hold more wealth than the entire bottom 50 percent of the population of these counties combined, more than half a million people. Together, the top 1 percent in Silicon Valley control forty-eight times more wealth than the bottom 50 percent.

Palantir, the data defense tech company cofounded by Stanford stars like Peter Thiel, is a Silicon Valley darling hoovering up many bright young engineers. Currently, its CEO, Alex Karp, makes more in a year than the *entire company* earns in gross revenue. This is possible because the company trades at well over five hundred times its earnings, thanks to Silicon Valley's unshakable belief in exponential future growth.

When the talented artificial intelligence researcher Ilya Sutskever started Safe Superintelligence, he launched with nine employees, a two-hundred-word placeholder statement, and zero articulation of a product, much less any revenue. The company was valued at $32 billion. Higher than the National Bank of Canada, the cosmetics giant Estée Lauder, and even the third-largest auto manufacturer in the world, Hyundai,

Copyrighted Material

which produces more than four million cars a year. SSI, meanwhile, has produced nothing.

Thinking Machines, another AI company, raised $2 billion at a $10 billion valuation in 2025, although the pitch to investors "offered no information about a product or financial plans," according to the *Financial Times*. Five months later, the startup was seeking more funding at a valuation of $50 billion or even $60 billion, Bloomberg reported.

Silicon Valley runs on the assumption of potential. It runs on the notion that heights are limitless and hurdles along the way will inevitably be smoothed by the exercise of brute will. It runs on the idea that the people in these startups will eventually produce untold riches.

So if this is a modern-day gold rush, the resource to mine is talent. And nowhere can you find more of it than Stanford University.

AT AGE SEVENTEEN, I, TOO, CAME WEST SEARCHING FOR GOLD. I WAS A true believer in the power of technology to effect change—I still am, I guess. But my relationship to this world has grown . . . complicated.

From the moment I set foot on Stanford's campus, I learned that teenagers like me were a commodity. We were to be protected and preserved, cosseted and buttered up, exploited, manipulated, funded, bribed, and cultivated. We were business.

A whole economy has sprung up around identifying the next great talent. Getting in on the ground floor of the next trillion-dollar startup makes your career, so adults hunt relentlessly for a meal ticket. They fetishize youth.

The perks lavished on a select few Stanford students are astonishing. I was just weeks into freshman year when I found myself at a party at a mansion in the hills, thrown by a student group that funneled cash from tech companies through a slush fund into the pockets of teenagers. I quickly discovered that there was a Stanford inside Stanford, an exclusive world of excess and access afforded to those identified as "high agency"—those special super-geniuses who will reshape the world in their image.

Copyrighted Material

I also discovered a kind of rot.

What I loved about technology—the ability to create, the idea of doing something no one has ever done before, the engineering puzzle pieces that come together to make up our modern life—was often subordinated to naked ambition. Over the course of my freshman year, people I got to know in the tech world would admit to me to tax evasion and tax fraud, research misconduct, embezzlement and misappropriation of funds, securities fraud, insider trading, academic dishonesty, operating slush funds and shell companies, hacking, reckless endangerment, and abetting foreign dictators. The breadth and array of bad behavior was staggering. There was a culture, I discovered, that enabled and even embraced cut corners. And it went all the way to the top.

Right as I was gaining access to the Stanford inside Stanford, I found myself sucked into student journalism. It started small; I joined *The Stanford Daily* as a hobby. But not even a month into college, I stumbled across a story that would force me to commit. A story about the president of Stanford.

Marc Tessier-Lavigne was a world-renowned neuroscientist—and an extraordinarily wealthy former biotech executive—who'd been at the helm of the university since 2016 and maintained a sterling reputation. But when I began poking around, I found something darker: a slew of apparently fraudulent research studies bearing his name published across two decades.

Suddenly, the year I thought would be dominated by classes and coding marathons gave way to middle-of-the-night meetings with secret sources, anonymous letters showing up at my doorstep, stakeouts, attacks from powerful lawyers, and a frenzied chase to unearth the truth. What began with a student newspaper article about college parties led to my investigating a multinational corporation, a deal worth tens of billions, and the real story behind famous research that had purported to identify the cause of Alzheimer's disease.

Copyrighted Material

All of this while watching in real time as my peers learned to commit the same kind of misconduct I was reporting on.

STANFORD, FOUNDED DURING THE GILDED AGE BY A ROBBER BARON who came west during the gold rush, was once a regional university, a magnet for wealthy Californians but no match for the academic rigor of the East Coast establishment. That's why they call it the Farm, in honor of Leland Stanford's horse farm, which once occupied this ground. That's why the mascot is a tree. And that's why Stanford's ethos was shaped around being an underdog.

All of that changed with the tech boom.

For the last few decades, Stanford has been an institution ascendant like no other, transforming into an international juggernaut with an admissions rate of 3.6 percent. Under the leadership of President John Hennessy from 2000 to 2016, more than seventy new buildings were erected, and Stanford became the top school in the country in fundraising, the first to surpass $1 billion a year.

Boosted by incredible resources and its symbiotic relationship with Silicon Valley, Stanford has made a strong claim in recent years to be the greatest university in the world. Almost every program aspires to be the best—the business school, the law school, the schools of medicine, humanities and sciences, and, of course, engineering. Stanford boasts the most influential in-house think tank of any university. It has won the Directors' Cup, given to the best overall collegiate athletics program in the NCAA, twenty-six of the thirty-two times it has been awarded. It has produced both the most ten-figure companies of any school and, in the most recent games, double the Olympic medals of the next-highest university.

By 2014, *The New York Times* declared that "Harvard Is the Stanford of the East." Yes, "riding a wave of interest in technology, Stanford University has become America's 'it' school, by measures that Harvard once dominated," with the upstart university unseating an institution synonymous with success from its founding in 1636. Since then, the gap has only widened. Harvard's yearly budget grew $2.2 billion between

Copyrighted Material

fiscal years 2013 and 2024; Stanford's grew $9.9 billion. Even if you remove the Stanford Hospital system, the university's annual revenue is nearly twice that of Harvard or Yale, despite educating about the same number of students. Stanford spends more in a year than Columbia has in its whole endowment. In fact, at $18.3 billion including the hospital system, Stanford's annual budget eclipses that of 116 countries. Nicaragua is a nation of nearly 7 million people, yet Stanford's expenses could cover the government's entire yearly budget—*times four*.

Stanford and Silicon Valley are intertwined in unique fashion. While the Ivy League has been a pipeline to Wall Street and Washington, half of Silicon Valley was literally built on Stanford land. They are codependent. The technology boom after World War II was born at the Stanford Research Park, where the microwave tube, ethernet, and the personal workstation were developed. William Shockley's attempts to commercialize a new transistor design at the park gave birth to the semiconductor boom that provided Silicon Valley its name (referencing the silicon needed to make computer chips). The early tech giant Sun Microsystems, which helped usher in the next wave of innovation, was named for "Stanford University Network," and the first website in the United States was created for the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center.

The Stanford Research Park has been home to the headquarters of Hewlett-Packard, Facebook, and Theranos. Nowadays, there are roughly 150 companies housed at the park, including Tesla, Google, and Lyft; the cumulative value of companies that currently maintain offices on Stanford land is north of $6 trillion. The venture capital firms, or VCs, are just up the hill, clustered along Sand Hill Road, ready to fund new startups from promising students, who then frequently set up shop nearby, hiring almost exclusively other Stanford students and kicking back some of the proceeds to the university. The whole system is integrated; Stanford even operates its own VC fund to seed students, bragging that companies it has incubated are "3X more likely to reach $100 million in valuation."

Copyrighted Material

Stanford students worship the legend of Google emerging from a graduate student's garage, Instagram hatching from alumni network outreach, and DoorDash growing out of a class project by students who wanted food delivery to their dorm. A 2011 study found that Stanford alumni and faculty had founded forty thousand active companies; today that list includes giants like Anthropic, Capital One, Cisco, Electronic Arts, Expedia, LinkedIn, Netflix, Nike, OpenAI, Yahoo!, Zillow, and others. It also includes some you might not expect— Bain & Company, Charles Schwab, Trader Joe's, TSMC, Victoria's Secret, and more.

Last year, the Nvidia founder and Stanford alum Jensen Huang came back to campus to give a talk, after which he handed out five-thousand-dollar graphic cards with his autograph in gold ink. Students mobbed him, desperate for a signature, offering laptops, T-shirts, anything. And in his leather jacket, with his exhortation to work from dawn till dusk, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, Jensen Huang was what passed for a rock star.

"There are a hundred and fifty people—and they're all men—who run the world," the billionaire Chamath Palihapitiya once told a Stanford audience. The students listened, enraptured; after all, the lecture was entitled "View from the Top." Palihapitiya continued, "Anyone who wants to go into politics? They're all puppets." Instead, to succeed is "to aggregate enough of the capital of the world to then reallocate it against your worldview."

And that's why so many people are desperate to go here. What is a Stanford degree worth? Well, at least $6.5 million to one family that paid its way in the door, the largest sum uncovered in the Varsity Blues admissions-cheating scandal.

THE TRUTH IS, STANFORD POSSESSES MANY ADMIRABLE QUALITIES. The professors are outstanding, the opportunities remarkable. Describing this place exhausts superlatives. But it's also fraught, an institution that relishes its image as an underdog long after it stopped being one.

Copyrighted Material

Exactly a century before I arrived, Stanford president Ray Lyman Wilbur launched the First Million campaign—at the time, a daring act that marked the beginning of organized fundraising on campus. But he was already growing worried. He expressed "regret that students are often given too large an allowance of money, and some are given or loaned automobiles by their parents or others." He admonished, "There is no need to supply money for orchids for dance partners, or for taxi hire. The student who is not content to lead the simple, clean, industrious life expected on the Stanford campus should go elsewhere."

Life at Stanford today is not "simple, clean, industrious." In fact, an individual student with sufficiently promising ideas or tech now has no trouble raising seven figures on their own, as much as Wilbur sought for the entire institution.

Is that a good thing?

One of Stanford's mottoes, chanted at opponents during sporting events and printed on T-shirts, captures how I've come to see this place: "Fear the Tree!" Stanford is charming and full of character; after all, its icon is a tree. To be on the inside is exhilarating. But it is also a truly fearsome environment. Stanford seeks to compete on every field, and win. That phrase captures my own ambivalence. Is it a good thing to fear the tree? A bad thing? Is it a rallying cry or a confession?

DESPITE ITS RENOWN, FEW PEOPLE UNDERSTAND HOW STANFORD REALLY works. I've spent the last three years trying to figure it out. I've had more one-on-ones with billionaires than I've been on formal dates. I've encountered genius and misdeed at every stage, from wide-eyed freshman wannabes to accomplished masters of the universe. This book is my attempt to show you what I've found.

Accountability in Silicon Valley is a hard-fought thing. Power protects itself, secrets remain hidden in plain sight, and robust guardrails are lacking. This was certainly my experience in reporting on the pres-

Copyrighted Material

ident, whose research had escaped scrutiny for years. But it was also my experience in uncovering the underbelly of the student body.

The Stanford inside Stanford is nothing like the school that most of its students experience. In fact, its perks are purposefully kept hidden, its entry points—like the hush-hush class I interviewed to get into—disguised. The Stanford inside Stanford comprises the group of students who are expected to inherit the earth, those courted constantly by the rich and powerful because they might be the Next Big Thing. The same fifty people who show up at every single VC dinner, every single insider event.

To live in this world is jarring, like being swept along by a current; by the time you're conscious enough to look up you've been carried miles away from where you began. It is alluring, and dangerous. When teenagers are placed in an environment with great opportunity and scant due diligence, they learn that they can get away with things. First a little embellishment, then an outright lie. I watched people I met at the beginning of freshman year discover how to manipulate the world around them, raising money off false pretenses or siphoning funds for themselves.

Perhaps what is most surreal about experiencing this place is the bizarre farrago of normal, formative college experiences with utterly absurd context.

One time, I met another student at a dinner party in Menlo Park. He was bright, curious, and openly contrarian—and I enjoyed arguing with him. He offered me a ride back to campus. And, from behind the wheel of his Tesla, he began talking about drugs. "The whole reason I'm studying chemistry is because of LSD," he said. "Have you tried it?" I told him I had not. He continued to tell me about "ketamine, LSD, shrooms, ecstasy, cocaine." Only thirty minutes after we met, he offered, "If you want, I'll be your dealer." Yes, he said, "Just hit me up."

This was sort of odd, right? But also very college. Except I looked up the kid's website later: At age nineteen, he'd already raised nearly

Copyrighted Material

$20 million for his software company, been named to the *Forbes* 30 Under 30 list, and had every prestigious validator of success. Even the drug dealers around here are cracked.

Recently, I was sitting in a small seminar on greed and the birth of capitalism. I noticed the kid next to me wasn't paying attention. He was on his laptop, tabbing back and forth between some sort of document and his text messages. Then I realized what he was doing.

While attending our history-of-capitalism course, my classmate was filling out the capitalization table for his new startup, determining what percentage of the company each investor and partner would get. The person he was texting was a top executive at one of the biggest companies in the world—his adviser. As the professor discussed avarice, I watched my classmate delete the percentage next to his own name and replace it with a higher number.

THIS BOOK IS TOLD THROUGH THE LENS OF MY FRESHMAN YEAR. IT WAS a weird one. I found myself torn between two worlds—that of a programmer glimpsing jaw-dropping wealth and that of a fledgling reporter revealing unsavory stories despite steep resistance. At one point, I returned a scientist's query about data falsification from the deck of a yacht. Later, I sent a tech company instructions about how to route large sums of cash while sitting in the newsroom of a daily student paper that could now afford to publish only once a week in print.

Throughout all this, I was trying to figure out just being a freshman—how to survive weeder classes, how to make friends, how to maintain a long-distance relationship, how to cope with grief, and how to live on my own across the country for the first time.

I was inspired to write this book in part by *One L*, Scott Turow's enduring account of his first year at Harvard Law School, which chronicled how pressure and privilege shaped students there in the 1970s. Like Turow, I've changed many of the names, especially of those under the age of twenty-five. That said, this is no roman à clef—there are no

Copyrighted Material

compound characters, no invented scenes, and no conversations that did not occur as described.

I have conducted more than 250 interviews with students, CEOs, VCs, Nobel laureates, scientific sleuths, professors, athletes, administrators, and more while reporting this book. My interview subjects have included three Stanford presidents (and the widow of a fourth), three Stanford provosts, and several trustees. I have also relied on extensive troves of documents, including financial filings, contemporaneous notes, images, blog posts, legal papers, internal memos, text messages, and slide decks. This book has been subject to rigorous editorial review, independent fact-checking, and legal vetting to present the most comprehensive portrait possible.

In the end, this is a book not about any one person, but about an institution that is profoundly influential—and deeply inaccessible. It is about a culture that embraces getting ahead at any cost, that lacks safeguards to fully address bad behavior, where geniuses are stockpiled, ready to reinvent the world but taught instead how to prioritize their self-interest.

This is a book about the kids being raised to rule the world, and what they're learning from those who already do.

AS I FINISHED MY INTERVIEW WITH JUSTIN ON THAT RAINY DAY IN November 2022, I discovered the true purpose of the secret class.

"The last thing I judge you on," Justin told me, "is who you identify." Justin was looking for "high-agency individuals" and said I could provide up to three names of other people I thought were exceptional—and that he would assess *me* based on how good they were.

It was a brilliant scheme.

Justin's class, it turned out, wasn't a real class in the sense of earning course credit, although there were lectures, discussions, and guest speakers, and it was held each week on Stanford's campus. It was more like a secret society, a Skull and Bones for the aspiring tech elite. It was

Copyrighted Material

a means to an end. Justin was networking with teenagers he expected to be useful in the future. Only he'd figured out how to flip the script and make them come to him.

Justin knew that a certain elite cohort of Stanford students wouldn't be able to resist the mystique he cultivated, the notion of this insider class no one would speak about, where only the very best of the best congregated to learn the secrets of the billionaires they aspired to become.

He called it "How to Rule the World."

Copyrighted Material

CHAPTER 1

DRAFTED TO THE WAR ON FUN

Stanford is supposed to look perfect.

From the sweeping, manicured lawns of pristine chromatic green, to the palm trees and hulking glass auditoriums that frame historic archways, to the sparkling blue-water fountains, chlorinated so students can splash around beneath the California sun, it's all curated to leave an impression of wonder. Stanford is an oasis, a place where Rodin sculptures stand next to nuclear laboratories. It is gorgeous, expansive, and, most of all, imposing.

I arrived for my first day of college on a brisk September morning in 2022 full of nervous energy. I could recite the Stanford propaganda by heart. I'd watched all the videos, read the entire course catalog, and eagerly devoured research papers from a dozen different labs. Now I took it all in, the pine-and-eucalyptus-scented air, the seagulls perched atop terra-cotta-tiled roofs. My hand trembled slightly as I opened the door of my family's rental car. For some reason, the student orientation coordinators were wearing cow costumes as they jumped up and down to greet us.

Copyrighted Material

Stanford had been my dream since I was seven, much to the surprise of everyone around me on the East Coast. I'd fallen in love with the

notion that all this genius had been concentrated in one institution, coming together to reshape the world. "Buzzing with ideas and innovation, approaching questions with openness and curiosity, pursuing excellence in all we do—this is Stanford," the school's website claimed. *Things were happening out there.*

I wanted to be part of them.

It wasn't just the tech or the innovation. Stanford combined excellence with a quirky, freewheeling attitude that set it apart from its competitors. Students constructed makeshift boats to traverse Lake Lagunita and built motorized couches to get to class. Irreverence was said to be an integral part of the experience. When students graduated, they participated in the Wacky Walk. Instead of wearing staid black robes into commencement, graduates donned satirical costumes, teaming up to construct a Stanford-themed pirate ship, wearing cardboard representations of their favorite campus street signs, or dressing as Stanford "Cardinals," pairing the school's signature Cardinal Red with a play on Catholic iconography.

I loved the idea that Stanford, despite its competitive excellence, had somehow still retained the reputation of being laid-back, chill. The campus was designed to be isolated, offering a reprieve from the real world where students could go about the business of brilliance and have a good time doing so. Who wouldn't want to go to a perfect-looking place full of perfect-looking people, glowing beneath perennially blue skies?

This was the promise of Stanford: beauty, idiosyncrasy, perfection.

IT TOOK TWENTY MINUTES TO DRIVE FROM THE CAMPUS ENTRANCE TO my dorm. The snaking caravan of halting, overstuffed SUVs seemed endless. Nobody seemed to know how to use a roundabout. But it gave me a good chance to observe.

Copyrighted Material

Students experienced every possible emotion all at once. Some cried and hugged their parents; some buzzed with enthusiasm; others were